



## Ethics of consumption: Individual responsibility

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### ABSTRAK

*Sistem ekonomi kapitalis menyumbang kepada pembinaan budaya konsumer di kalangan masyarakat. Kesan negatif budaya konsumer terhadap alam sekitar dan kehidupan sosial menjadikan ramai dari kalangan anggota masyarakat mencari-cari panduan daripada etika kepenggunaan. Kertas ini membincangkan tanggungjawab individu sebagai pengguna beretika dari perspektif Islam. Turut dibincangkan adalah faktor-faktor yang menggalakkan perkembangan budaya konsumer dalam sistem ekonomi kapitalis, sistem ekonomi Islam dan perlakuan beretika yang boleh dijadikan amalan di peringkat individu.*

### INTRODUCTION

A human being was, is, and will always be a consumer as long as he exist, no doubt about that. For instance, we have to consume oxygen in the air, water, and food to stay alive. Hence, in this respect, there is nothing wrong with consumption except when we exceed the limit from merely consuming of only what we need to over consuming what we want or what we desire. When 'need' has been upgraded to 'want' or 'desire', when wealth is used to identify our status in society, this is called over consumption and over consumption is unethical in any traditions. According to Michaelis (2000), "The association of material consumption with the greater good contradicts the teachings of religions and philosophers over the last three thousands years." However, the race for material consumption seems to have an irresistible attraction still. She further noted that there is nothing new in excessive consumption by the wealthy. There is a long history for the use of material artefacts as a medium for displaying our identity and status in society. "The court burials in the ancient Egyptian pyramids bear witness to this; so does the Roman's custom of using emetics to induce vomiting during banquets to be able to continue eating" (Michaelis 2000).

## THE ETHICS OF CONSUMPTION

The ethics of consumption is the concept of right and wrong and the rule of behaviour that influence consumption (Michaelis 2000). The unhealthy modern consumption patterns have led many scholars and authors to search theoretically and practically for sustainable consumption patterns. They are in the search for strong ethical basis to better shape consumption patterns.

Authors like Crocker and Linden (1998), and Westra and Werhane (1998), each provides a wide range of views on the ethics of modern consumption patterns and the approaches that should be taken to change them. Mansfield College, Oxford in 1999 has established The Oxford Commission on Sustainable Consumption acting as a catalyst and facilitator for government, business, citizens, the media and others to take actions to achieve sustainable patterns of consumption. They produce an Action Plan and setting out practical steps towards sustainable consumption (Michaelis 2000). Authors like Walter and Dorothy Schwarz (1998) spent three years travelling in Britain, Europe, USA, Australia, India and Japan to find out how is it like to live a simpler life beyond supermarket. They found that people who live a simpler life is much happier “in local economy, providing basic food and livelihood for all, than the global one which changes food into a commodity, destroys jobs, devalues cultures and devastates the human and natural environment.” The authors then noted that they have become “convinced that the world’s economic system is flawed: many of its rewards are illusory, effectively diminishing instead of enhancing our wellbeing; others are unhealthy; all are unsustainable.”

Hence, recent research has rebutted the old notion concerning positive relationship between wealth and happiness and confirms the widespread wisdom that aiming for wealth is unlikely to lead to happiness. Once people met their basic needs for nutrition, shelter and health they do not generally get more satisfied as they get wealthier. (Schwarz & Schwarz, 1998; Jackson and Marks, 1999; Inglehart, 2000; Michaelis, 2000). To quote from Schwarz & Schwarz (1998), “the emerging global market is in effect a new world empire worshipping false gods of consumerism and greed.”

In the third world countries almost everyone lives a simple life with a small minority of over average in wealth. And it is hard to tell these people to be more moderate in consumption when they do not have very much of resources left for consumption within their countries’ borders. Obviously they are not to blame for the natural resources (for them to keep the simple life) have been torn down. Today, their forests are cut down diminishing the food supply that these people depend on for centuries, water supplies are polluted or drained off for industrial use, marine resources are depleted by mechanized foreign ships, and homes and lands are drowned to build a huge new dam (Schwarz & Schwarz

1998). They are forced to live with the leftover and in many cases the leftover is not sufficient to support their life. Hence, their poverty give more constraint on the scarce natural resources as the resources do not have enough time to regenerate. These people then are forced to join the global economy without sufficient works and adequate infrastructures await them. Furthermore, it is not easy to ask them to change from their previous economic activities to another due to lack of experience, education and training. It is like asking a farmer to be a fisherman overnight.

This is not to say that we should reject technology and development, but to use technology in the name of development to build large dams which tend to benefit the rich instead of the needy is unethical. In this kind of project, even the local people whose settlements have been taken away are unable to benefit in whatsoever sense as far as the project is concern. They normally be relocated, and have to start their life from scratch again. There is nothing wrong for the technology to be used to serve the needs of people by introducing equitable water distribution and organic farming into settlement areas such as villages except that the rich are unable to achieve the goal of profit maximization dictates by Capitalist economic system.

Thus, the problem of over consumption in society is closely link with a bigger economic system which needs changes in both production and consumption sides – the global economy. For the purpose of this paper, though the over consumption problem in our society today rooted in both production and consumption, I will focus only on consumption and to be exact the individual consumption.

As far as the concept of ‘sustainable development’ (in meeting human needs) is concern, current patterns of consumption are a cause for concern in two ways. First, they are not meeting the needs of all the people of the current generation. Second, by damaging the environment and overexploiting resources, they are compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs (Michaelis 2000). And for a Muslim community I would like to suggest another one – let us call it the end of the day concern – today’s patterns of consumption are not meeting the needs to live up to the will of Allah. In other words, the current consumption patterns do not enable us nor assist us in anyway to live true to the will of Allah. I think this concern is the greatest concern for a Muslim, and deserves our vital attention and action. It is undeniable that people do things better with some motivations and in this sense Muslims are very lucky. Islam has provided us with that motivation – rewards on the earth and in the Hereafter. For Muslim community what matters in our economic life are need fulfilment, justice, freedom, efficiency and growth. Life has meaning beyond the visible and measurable – that is to live true to the will of Allah.

Let us take some actions so that we can divorce consumption from greed and return to its primary purpose of fulfilling needs through persuasion by example.

## INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY

Our responsibility as an individual concerning consumption is two facets, first to understand the economic situation that we live in, and second to act on it towards a better consumption pattern. Therefore, in order to proceed with our actions we need to understand the forces of consumption in Capitalist economic system that create consumer society or consumer culture. However it is not the purpose of this paper to discuss everything about these concepts, but just enough to make us understand the vitality of our actions much better when we act towards our responsibility of ethical consumption within the framework of Islamic economic system.

### *Capitalist economic system*

In the broader philosophical-political sense Capitalism is a social system based on the principle of individual rights, and in the narrower economic sense, it is generally mean a free-market (The Capitalism Site, \_\_\_\_). Capitalism believes that ‘man is not a slave to the ends of society; rather he is an end in himself’ (The Capitalism Site-Tour, \_\_\_\_). Capitalists like Ayn Rand stressed “the concept of man as heroic being, with his own happiness as the moral purpose of his life, with productive achievement as his noblest activity, and reason as his only absolute” (Ayn Rand Institute Website, \_\_\_\_).

In Capitalist economic system, the efforts (commonly by governments) to closer the gap between the rich and the poor were always perceive as abuses of individual rights to pursue one’s material aims. Yes! We have an obligation to work if we wish to live well, and we have the right to enjoy what we have earned. But in this economic system, can we sincerely believe that those who do not have the means to support themselves, whether individuals or countries, have not worked hard enough? No, this is not necessarily true. In many cases, people in poor and developing countries have worked as hard as (if not more) than people in developed/industrialized countries. The situation in poor and developing countries has caused (more often than not) by a number of other factors – lack of education and training, lack of opportunity available, lack of justice in society, lack of political stability and so forth. In fact, some of the industrialized countries seem to ensure that the lacking in the factors mentioned

stays that way in some of developing countries that pose economic threat to her or refused to do business on her terms.

In this system, “the rich do not generally see other people’s needs as a reason to forego their own rights, unless those needs are highly visible and urgent” (Michaelis 2000). Individual in industrialized countries are willing to contribute in response to pictures of starving and homeless people in the media. While they might agree in theory that it is necessary to closer the gap between the rich and the poor, they do not see it as their obligation to contribute towards the aim. In this system, the inequities in society are increasingly obvious. Though there are a number of international agreements on technology transfer are signed, “the rich countries remain reluctant to support the degree of capacity building that would be necessary for poor countries to become equal competitors in world market” (Michaelis 2000). In many cases, the poor must simply learn to help themselves to compete in the real world of the market (Michaelis 2000). Taxation is a mean in Capitalist economic system created to meet public needs but it is increasingly seen as a breach of the rights of the hard working (Michaelis 2000).

### *Consumer society or consumer culture*

According to Slater (1997) consumer society or consumer culture generally refer to “the way in which consumption is organized within modern capitalist societies over the modern period.” He further noted that it is “gathering social weight and importance from the eighteenth century onwards with periods of huge transformation in the twentieth century.” He also observed that in consumer society or consumer culture, “consumption by and large takes the form of consuming commodities, goods obtained through market exchange rather than produced for direct use.”

Consumer society dictates that unregulated competition is the best and the only way to organize the world, and a good life can be obtained through what we own and how much we acquire. The crises of spiralling personal debt, the environment, and economy are all the results of over-consumption in what we call consumer society or consumer culture. Consumer society or consumer culture hold the views of material progress, limitless consumption, material possessions and social positions, the body defines the individual, nature serves our ends, self serving behaviour, cutthroat competition, cultural industries tied to commercial interests, and personal autonomy.

In consumer society or consumer culture, advertisement is one of the major culprits. One of the biggest hurdles in divorcing consumption from greed or evil desire is to cope with this commercial persuasion consumers are exposed to especially young people. They are subjected to an intensive bombardment



of images, a large proportion of which has a commercial purpose. Advertising often plays on feelings of insecurity that teenagers have. Beauty, confidence, companionship and happiness are sold in the form of clothes, shoes, beauty care products, and other items. It is easy for parents and young people to become squeezed between the demands of the “market” and the financial realities of the family.

Just to cite an example, in March 16-17, 2004 New Zealand television news reported that women around the world proudly cheering the notion that women who purchase their own diamonds for their right hand fingers indicates self confidence and the feeling of ‘in control.’ This notion is propagated by De Beers Diamond Company. The irony is that according to this company, women should still leave the left hand fingers for men to buy them diamonds. This is obviously nothing more than a new marketing strategy used by De Beers. Astonishingly, by just a little psychological twist women around the world fall into the consumption trap.

Consumer society or consumer culture has also blurred the definition of ‘needs.’ ‘Need’ has been used in several different ways. However, the highest of ‘need’ must be meaning that if one does not get something such as food, one will die. This is known as physiological needs. The second highest ‘need’ must be meaning that if one does not get something such as security, respect, love, and justice, one does not usually die but one’s ability to function as a full participant in a society may be impaired. These two kinds of ‘need’ – though the latter is quite subjective – seem very reasonable enough. There is another kind of ‘need’ that truly dangerous to the concept of ‘moderation in consumption’ adheres by Muslims. ‘Need’ has come to be used to indicate ‘wants’ or ‘desires.’ If we carefully listen to the advertisement on television and radio, we will hear marketing professionals speaks of making consumers aware of their need for new products, and services. They even create new needs. The use of the word ‘need’ in ‘I need a new dress’, grants social acceptability and even obligation on the desire. It avoids the impression of selfishness that may be associated with saying ‘I want.’ “Implicit in the use of the word ‘need’ is an appeal to duty and to rights. If I need something, others have a duty to provide it, and I have a right to have my need satisfied” (Michaelis 2000).

The failure to distinguish these different meanings has led to confusion on what we really ‘need’ and what we just ‘want’ or ‘desire.’ This is also frequently associated with the notion that if one has money one is justified to increase one’s ‘need’. In other words, the wealthy one is the more ‘need’ one can have and it is justified. This is exactly the behaviour expected in consumer society – the view that we should be able to buy what we like, when we like it, as much as we like it. How many times we hear ourselves giving justification to this situation by saying ‘sure they can have it, they can afford it’ whereas

affordability is not always rightly serves as the ethical reference for consumption. The more we demand a certain goods the more consumption take place in terms of natural resources on the production side, and the more waste we generate on the consumption side which then need more consumption of natural resources such as energy to degrade or decompose the waste.

Hence, in consumer society create by Capitalist economic system, good life is increasingly viewed in material terms. Increment in material consumption is a primary aim to then achieve status in community. This system encourages people to strive to be materially better off than others, and emphasis individual interests more than responsibilities to a wider community. Individual freedom to own property and to consume has no limits nor does it subjected to any constraints, not even the constraint of social justice. "The only legitimate argument for limiting anyone's consumption is that it causes direct harm to somebody else" (Michaelis 2000).

### *Islamic economic system*

Though the values in consumer society are largely shared by many but there are also communities that adhere to religious value systems with their own view on the 'good life.' Islam taught the Muslims that God is to be honoured through work as much as through prayer. Good life for Muslims is that which Allah would have us live. Good life in consumer society always been associated with happiness. In Islam, happiness is strongly connected with being closer to Allah. The motivation for living well is not supposed to be material well-being but to live true to the will of Allah. No prohibition of earning wealth in Islam provided it is honestly earned and shared with the poor.

Without moral guide that based on *Syari'ah* derived from the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah*, many have found themselves caught up in a conflict between individual freedom and social responsibility. This is due to the association of happiness with material consumption levels. In a true Muslim community, individual have to strike a balance between self interest and society's interest. Islam calls for a greater equity to live peacefully, and a greater harmony to live sustainably. Islam also calls for a balance between material progress and non-material. In Islam, an individual should place his/her generosity towards community. Islam sees identity through participation of good deeds in society where individual is part of a greater whole. All creatures are living organisms, and we should have a personal connection with all around us. A fair competition in both economic behaviour and cultural industries has a balanced perspective, and they should not be tied to commercial interests.

Hence, the general individual responsibility in Islam (in this case economic responsibility, and to be exact, the ethical responsibility of

consumption) is to strike a balance between one self (self-interest) and society (social interest). Islam allows freedom of earning wealth by *halal* means through which we give some real and useful service to the community and thereby entitles us to a fair and just compensation for it. But we may not spend our wealth on wasteful expenditure such as idle luxury, and we may not use our wealth to behave arrogantly towards others. We are permitted to accumulate wealth that is left over after meeting our legitimate and reasonable commitments such as paying *zakat*. The savings can also be used to produce more wealth by investing it in our own legitimate business or other's legitimate business on the basis of a profit-loss sharing. However we must deal fairly and honestly with people we do business with in trade, industry or agriculture, with our employees, with a Government and with the community at large. It is perfectly acceptable in Islam if working within these limits, a person become a millionaire. Through Islamic inheritance law the wealth that concentrated at one person be spread to a large number of people – first, to near relatives; second, (if there is no near relatives) to distance relatives; and lastly (if there is no distance relatives), to Muslim community. The law avoids the creation of any big family of Capitalist or landlords (Mawdudi, \_\_\_\_).

Western society still on the debate about God's purpose for humanity in nature – did God create nature to give sustenance to humanity, or did He create humanity to act as steward to nature? In Islam nature is created by God with its religious and social functions, the first is to glorify God and the latter is to sustain human life but this notion is not a ticket for us to freely exploit the nature as Islam dictates various ethical concepts concerning consumptions such as moderation in life, avoidance of waste, no transgression and so forth, and the most important of all is *khilafah* (caliphate) where human is the *Khalifah* (Caliph) on earth. Hence, Islam has clearly states that human and nature are symbiosis to each other (though we may need nature more than nature needs us); as much as nature provides for our needs, it is our responsibility to act as *Khalifah* to nature.

The symbiotic relationship between human and nature is rarely realize by people today may be because we have been divorced from a direct contact with nature for so long. For instance, today we find our food, clothes, and other necessities in shops and supermarkets rather than in the jungle. And most of these necessities are hardly in their original forms. Furthermore, many people have worked in manufactories rather than lands. With the development of electric light, food transport and storage technologies, heating, air conditioning, and cars, we hardly pay attention to the cycle of day and night, the weather and seasons. All of these have diminished the direct contact between human and nature along with our appreciation towards nature than the era when we have to earn our necessities directly from nature. The intermediary factors such as



supermarkets, manufacturing sectors, industrial sectors and so on have diminished the close contact between people and nature, leading to less appreciation of nature in its true sense – people who in the one hand appreciate nature and on the other hand lives in over-consumption manner is not in a true sense appreciate nature. The irony is today people around the world is very concern with the environmental deterioration when at the same time they are so eager to be industrialized, to consume more and more luxurious items, striving for materially better life than before. Clearly, these people are fond merely to the idea of environmental protection but not to the actions towards achieving it. This is not to suggest that we must reject technology and development and leave our life now and live in the jungle but simply to reflect how important is the nature to us and how much we have forget that. This is to realize how much we need the nature enough to not live in over-consumption manner like most of us do today. No matter how minor the action to leave over-consumption behaviour seems to be, it is actually a global contribution to the environment we live in.

### *The ethical action of consumption*

Though all of us are well aware of Islamic teachings about being moderate in life including in our economic life but we find it very difficult to practice them in today's society. Today's society has trapped us in a some kind of lifestyle that blur our wise judgment from what are the necessary needs and what are actually our evil desires.

The time has come for us as a Muslim consumer to start making effective ethical decision-making in consumption. Furthermore, as a consumer we must guarantee sustainable patterns of life and consumption and consider the ethical consequences of consumption. What we can do as an individual is to get out from the dominance of Capitalist economic system. How do we do that? One thing we have to know about capitalism is the system relies on individual self-interest to fuel innovation and drive the economy (Michaelis 2000). Without the obsession of individual self-interest and with Islamic economic system that taught us to strike a balance between self interest and the society (social interest) that then lead to equality and justice, capitalism would not function in Muslim community that adheres to this Islamic teachings. We can start with a gradual change in domestic or family life. We might want to spend less on private transport, personal security, and private education and health. We can be quite certain that if this money is used for public amenities in the same areas, social interests would be effectively met. This means more advantages and benefits for more people at large instead of channeled to a small minority of rich people.

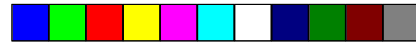
We might also want to stop using material goods to define our social status or to obtain some level of acceptability within many social groups. Our modern lifestyles are greatly surplus consumption levels far beyond meeting the basic physiological needs. We use material goods to help define who we are, and to communicate our identity to others (Doughlas & Isherwood 1978). Our status in a community is established through the homes we live in, the cars we drive, the clothes we wear, and the holidays we take (Bourdieu, 1984; Schor 1998).

We can (as a consumer) help abolish the 'positional goods' that is used to demonstrate social position. When there is no demand there is no supply. Since 1970s, in the light of environmental awareness, authors like Hirsch (1977), and others have argued that there is a need to find a way of abolishing the power of 'positional goods' that then will lead to diminish the power of positional lifestyle though undoubtedly hard to counter attack the forces that promote consumer society.

We might also want to reconsider in taking bank loans that easily available to buy almost every luxurious items. We might also want to think twice before subscribing to any credit cards widely made available by creditors such as master cards, American express, visa cards, gold cards, platinum cards, and so forth. Within Capitalist economic system practiced everywhere in the world – Muslims and non-Muslims alike – luxurious items have become everyday needs, materials are associated with social status and happiness or good life. People are comparing themselves with celebrities and television characters rather than their neighbours (Schor 1998 in Michaelis 2000). Michaelis (2000) observed, "The new consumer credit industry has provided a substantial additional set of incentive to increase consumption, and help to remove the constraints on consumption, in the last three to four decades."

Living in Capitalist economic system that promote consumer society allows the market today to have so many choices available for the same products that sometimes we end up buying the same thing more than one, just a different brand or label. Almost everyone agrees more or less that we need quality of life, but let us not mistaken it with quantity of stuff. We need to live more purposefully and with minimum of needless distractions. Otherwise we will find ourselves with so many groups of people that having so much yet meant so little. People who define social standing, happiness and good life in the sense of material consumption is likely to be dissatisfied as long as they live.

Many employers make it difficult to choose free time, rather than long hours and higher incomes. Though hardworking is good but let us not jeopardize human relationships especially with our children, and other family members and friends, neighbours and so on. We can also enhance our ability to connect with the other elements on the earth such as by asking two of the



most important questions in our times as far as consumption goes – ‘where does this stuff come from and where does it go when we done with it?’ Whenever we can, shift away from processed foods and foods grown via unsound farming to natural foods. We can develop skills for more self-reliance such as gardening, carpentry, do it yourself culture and so on. Whenever possible, change transportation modes to biking, walking, carpooling and live closer to work. And we can re-think about our conceptions of ‘money’ and ‘goods’ of what they actually represented.

There are several other things that we can do to reduce and gradually stop the madness of over-consumption. Consumption has a strong correlation with waste generation. The more we consume the more waste tend to be generated. As an individual and a consumer we can help reduce the over consumption of energy, natural resources and so on as well as avoiding too much waste by changing our behaviours on purchasing, using and waste handling. As for purchasing we can start engaging ourselves in a few pre-cycling behaviours. We can shop at second hand shops for certain things like furniture instead of buying new. We can buy refillable items like perfume and ink pen instead of non-refillable ones. We can buy produce with as little packaging as possible such as loose fruit and vegetables not packaged, and if we have no choice we can buy products with packaging that can be re-used or recycled, just look for the phrase ‘environmentally friendly’ on the label. We can take our own basket or bags when going shopping rather than the one provided by the shop. And if we happen to buy items in plastic bags we do not have to dispose them rather keep them for further use instead. We can buy products that can be used again rather then items that can only be used once. We can buy canned drinks and/or glass bottled drinks rather than plastic bottled drinks. We can buy a bulky pack rather than small pack for products that our households consume in quantity. We can minimize organic waste by using every bit of the food that we prepare for our families and throwing away as little as possible. We can buy handkerchief rather than tissue, and washable nappies rather than disposable nappies.

As for re-use and recycling, we can re-use and recycling a number of old things in our household. We can wash and re-use dishcloths rather than buying them new. We can re-use and recycling our household solid waste for other purposes as well. We can re-use and/or recycle glass or glass bottles, cans, jars, textiles, foil, and old plastic containers like margarine and ice-cream tubs, and fresh milk bottles. We can re-use old baby clothes for a new baby rather than buying them new. We can re-use paper for wrappers, fireplace, and so forth. We can recycle household solid waste items such as paper, cardboard, junk mail, magazine and newspaper. We can come up with a creative artwork out of our household solid waste. We can take our households’ old recyclable



items to a recycling centre. And we can always try to repair things before buying new ones. We can sort out our household waste into recyclable and non-recyclable categories. We can throw garbage into an appropriately labelled garbage bin. We can feed our pets and/or livestock with our household organic waste and we can also make fertilizer out of it by composting it. We can freeze food leftovers for another meal, a later serving and/or unexpected guests. The list on individual ethical actions of consumption is endless.

## CONCLUSION

There are so much that we can do as a consumer to combat over-consumption in consumer society today. And being a Muslim is a plus point for us as we are equipped with a complete ethics of consumption provided by our religion – Islam. Hence, can we compete effectively with modern consumerism culture? The answer is in our hands, the *umma(h)*, because at the end of the day it is our choice to choose whether to live up economically true to the will of Allah fully, partially, or not at all.

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